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SUBJECT: LAWYERS' SIT-IN PAYS OFF

REF: ALGIERS 795

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reason 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: After organizing a 400-lawyer sit-in at the National Courts on June 18, the Algerian National Bar Association (BNA) was able to secure a meeting with the justice ministry to air its grievances. On June 20, BNA President Abdelmajid Sellini met with the ministry's secretary general, who agreed to several of the lawyers'

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demands. Lawyers returned to work on June 23, calling the June 20 meeting a breakthrough for judicial reform. They remain cautious, however, about the pace of change. The BNA will convene a general assembly June 25. End Summary.

12. (C) On June 18, the BNA organized a sit-in at the main courthouse of Algiers. Dressed in their black robes, about 400 lawyers blocked the entrance to the courthouse for more than two hours. The action was a follow-up to the June 10 nationwide lawyers' strike (reftel), which the government had effectively ignored. The sit-in had a more immediate effect: by the end of the afternoon of June 18, the secretary general of the justice ministry had agreed to meet with the lawyers on June 20.

13. (U) Sellini told the press that he deplored the absence of training for lawyers. He also detailed a raft of issues he planned to raise in his June 20 meeting with the Secretary General. Among the lawyers' demands were greater access to client files and to the Clerk's Office; offices at the new court building; creation of a school for training lawyers; and implementation of a requirement that judges address important questions on files in a single hearing.

14. (C) On June 23 human rights lawyer Mostefa Bouchachi told PolOffs that the meeting with MOJ Secretary General Mohamed Boufercha was very productive. According to Bouchachi, Boufercha promised Sellini that he would work to achieve rule of law in Algeria. He added that the two agreed on a specific agenda to set the stage for upcoming meetings and dialogue. Bouchachi said he thought Boufercha's sentiments were genuine and that a dialogue with the government had finally started. Nevertheless, he expected government change to be slow.

15. (C) Prominent attorney Fatma Benbraham told us June 23 that the MOJ had agreed to dedicate office space for legal counsel at Algiers' new courthouse and that the ministry also agreed to allocate two city blocks adjacent to the main courthouse for attorney parking. Benbraham commented that the real victory for the lawyers lay with the dismissal of legal proceedings against 39 lawyers who were accused of contempt of court. She reported that the MOJ agreed that any

court proceeding against a lawyer would require the approval of both the MOJ and the bar association. Not all of Benbraham's personal wishes were granted in the meeting, however: she had argued that Justice Minister Tayeb Belaiz should be forced to resign, blaming him for imposing impossible tasks on lawyers and judges and creating the conditions that precipitated the lawyers' strike.

¶6. (C) Human rights lawyer Khaled Bourayou told PolFSN that judicial reform was overdue and said it was a relief to put an end to the current crisis. Bourayou praised Sellini for obtaining the guarantees necessary to keep an open dialogue.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The public squabble between lawyers and the justice ministry reflects the extent to which many legal practitioners have felt increasingly marginalized and have, increasingly, grown intolerant of the lack of government responsiveness to their perceived professional needs. The apparent willingness on the part of the MOJ to address some of the lawyers' complaints tracks with our experience working with the ministry, which is one of the more open and reform-minded in the government.

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